

District Council Annual Report for Orwell Ward from Cllr Jane Gould

May 2021

The last year has been a very different one for all of us, defined by the Covid pandemic. For many, it has been a difficult year and the insecurity and fear will be with us as we move forward into the year ahead and, hopefully, start to return to a more normal day-to-day life.

COVID

During the last year Babergh Council have been working with partners and other local authorities across the county to ensure that the communities have received the support that they need. Local community groups that sprang up in our towns and parishes were offered support and a support line 'Home but not alone' was set up for anyone that may need it. There was also financial support for residents facing hardship due to self-isolation. As businesses across the county were forced to close, they were contacted by councillors and officers to ensure that they received the grants they were entitled to. Measures were put in place to ensure that council housing tenants were not evicted should they suddenly find that they were unable to pay their rent.

Unfortunately, many services had to be suspended during the lockdowns including our leisure facilities, face to face access points and some waste services. As we now exit the 3rd lockdown these services are slowly returning.

One of the main changes this year has been the move to virtual meetings. We all now know what Zoom is and, "you're still on mute" has been the statement of the year. Following a short suspension of all council meetings and a change in the way planning applications were decided for a while, we settled into a routine of attending all meetings from the comfort of our own home. One change that has come about from this is the ability for councillors to vote electronically. While this means the public cannot see the vote as it happens it is available online within 24 hours.

Recently a significant new grant fund has been launched by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, it is set to support the recovery of local businesses that are reopening after lockdown but are unable to access the Government's Restart Grant scheme. The councils' Discretionary Restart Grant is designed to help with costs

associated with reopening following the lifting of lockdown restrictions, to help businesses resume trading at pre-Covid levels. The grant will be a one-off payment of up to £18,000 for eligible businesses. Business owners must submit a new application for the Discretionary Restart Grant by 13th June. Regardless of whether they have received a previous Covid business support grant.

PLANNING - JOINT LOCAL PLAN

The Council finalised the Joint Local Plan, which details how and where development should take place, ensuring suitable homes are built to meet Government housing targets, whilst also protecting and enhancing the districts' natural environment and heritage. Sustainable development and transport options have been promoted in the plan. Following a final consultation that was completed just before Christmas the plan was submitted to the Secretary of State for examination.

5 YEAR HOUSING SUPPLY

A report into the current 5-year Housing Land supply in Babergh has demonstrated that the Council currently has enough approved developments for 6.75 years. The Council has 35% more properties approved than is required.

OTHER PLANNING MATTERS

The council submitted its thoughts on two consultation papers outlining major changes in planning. One government paper was for a completely new national planning system – the 'Planning for the Future' white paper. The other suggested shorter-term amendments to the current system, which would take effect more quickly. The council submitted a strong rebuttal to the proposals.

CIL FUNDING

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have approved over £4.39 million in CIL funding from housing growth in the last 12 months.

During the past twelve months over £3.26 million has been awarded to 35 projects across both districts. In addition, town, and parish councils across Babergh and Mid Suffolk received CIL funding totalling £1,138,909 during the year – with 21 of Babergh's town and parish councils receiving a share of £314,206.

ENVIRONMENT & BIODIVERSITY

The Biodiversity task forces submitted proposals this year that will form the Councils' first Biodiversity Action Plan. These set out how they aim to protect and strengthen biodiversity in the districts.

One of the Councils main carbon emitters is the diesel used by its fleet of vehicles. It was agreed that the fuel used will be changed to Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil (HVO) which will substantially reduce the councils carbon footprint.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are set to make further significant CO2 savings, thanks to a £1.4m Government grant for carbon-saving measures. Leisure centres and other buildings are expected to see solar PV panels and air source heat pumps installed on the council-owned sites so they can begin to move away from fossil-fuelled heating systems. The council also received an injection of up to £800,000 in matched funding from the "Getting Building Fund", with the money going towards a pilot scheme to introduce electricity micro-generation and storage solar carports in Sudbury and Stowmarket. The Cabinet at Babergh also approved additional funding for pilot solar carport schemes at Kingfisher Leisure Centre in Sudbury.

A Cycle motion that my colleague Leigh Jamieson submitted last summer was approved. The 1st lockdown saw a significant increase in the number of people that had either taken up cycling or returned to it. The motion was designed to help Babergh act on this. Babergh have also agreed to take their public realm work "in-house". This will allow the Council to manage verges and some open space more effectively for biodiversity and meadow type habitat.

BUDGET - GENERAL FUND BUDGET

The budget outlined earlier this year approved Babergh's share of council tax would increase by 2.96%, the equivalent of less than 10p a week (£5 a year) for an average Band D property.

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET

This HRA report included a CPI + 1% increase of 1.5% in Council House rents, equivalent to an average rent increase of £1.35 a week and that Sheltered Housing

Service charges be increased by £0.69 per week to ensure recovery of the actual cost of service.

CAR PARKING

The council's controversial decision to begin charging for parking in Hadleigh and Sudbury was approved earlier this year. The charges, which were opposed strongly by residents, will begin after the first hour of parking and will come into force no earlier than October. At the moment the car parks are heavily subsidised by taxpayers.

BELLE VUE, SUDBURY

Whitbread pulled out of the deal to take on a hotel, for their Premier Inn chain, in Belle Vue park, following the financial downturn caused by the coronavirus crisis. The sale of the council-owned land comprising of Belle Vue House, the car park and the northern part of the old swimming pool site, was openly marketed between December 2020 and February 2021. A proposal to create a new retirement living development plus a conversion of the existing Belle Vue house back into private living accommodation was accepted.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any issues that you think I can help with and all the very best to you all.

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